

Thompson's Reading Requirements
Read. Write. Repeat.
Literacy Matters!

I expect students to read. Reading is a critical life skill. Students who read well get better grades in school, score higher on standardized tests, and are better able to focus on, draw conclusions about, and make sense of their world. It is not unreasonable for a teacher to expect and require students to read, and I do. But every year, I do so with less support from students, parents, school and district administrators who should know better, and the community at large. Many people (including some teachers!) have given in to a modern culture in which everything works against literacy. They do not read themselves, and they don't expect kids to read, either. Yes, I know technology encourages fast-paced distractions, and students have all manner of athletic, musical, and social events to fill up their time – not to mention the cocoon of digital entertainment and communication most teenagers now live in – but literacy should be a priority in every student's life and the adults who care about them should support, encourage, and *require* lots of reading.

According to recent research, less than a third of American 13-year olds read daily. High school students average two hours of TV watching per day but only seven minutes of reading, and 20% of high school seniors read nothing but text messages. Half of 18- to 24-year olds read no books. Even reading scores for adults have deteriorated significantly since 1992, and more than 11 million American adults are functionally illiterate, meaning they cannot read well enough to understand a bus schedule or the instructions on a medicine bottle. Given this, is it any wonder our students score in the bottom half of the spectrum for average reading scores when compared with 30 other industrialized nations, far behind Poland, France, and Canada? Does this concern you? It should, especially if you are a non-reader and/or the parent of one. Why? Because two-thirds of American employers ranked reading comprehension as one of the most important skills for high school graduates, and 38% of those employers said current graduates are deficient in this area. That means those non-readers are not getting hired even for low-level work, and we have to look outside the United States to find enough research scientists to staff our labs and develop our new technology. The research can be summed up like this: People who read are more likely to have successful lives. It's that simple.

Ironically, research also indicates that students in lower elementary grades are reading more than ever before. This, however, stops when students enter junior high school. On average, my students are only in my classroom for an hour a day. During that hour I can show them lots of strategies for improving their reading and challenge them to read more difficult text than they might otherwise attempt on their own, but I can't follow them around for the rest of the day to make sure they practice. I can't go to their homes every evening and see if they have their noses in books. All I can do is make reading practice a class requirement. A coach requires players to come to practice for two hours after school; a band director requires 30 minutes of home practice each evening; a math teacher requires students to do homework equations to practice a skill learned in class. So too I *require* my students to practice reading outside of class. And just like a coach sees a player's improvement on the court or a band teacher hears improvement in a student's playing or a math teacher sees test scores improve, I too require *evidence* of reading practice: book talks, written reviews, comprehension tests, reading trackers, etc. Reading practice is calculated into students' grades, and those who don't read cannot get a grade above a C. It's not punishment; it's practice. And, yes, literacy is *that* important.

Of course, students are encouraged to read and enjoy as many self-selected books as they want, but in order to earn Reading Practice credit, high school students (including ninth graders) will be assigned two books each term from a classroom reading list. These books are to be read by the student as homework according to the schedule provided. Near midterm, there will be a test on the first assigned book. The week before the end of the term, there will be a test on the second one. Each test will account for 10% of the student's term grade.